

## Time Capsule Transcript: Laudan Nooshin and Rachel Cowgill

**Laudan** [00:00:00] It's nice to have this opportunity to reflect on our relationship with the RMA and our experiences within it, so thank you for inviting us to have this conversation.

**Rachel** [00:00:11] Great to see you, Laudan: it's really nice. We haven't spoken for a while, have we? So, it's nice to have the excuse.

**Laudan** [00:00:16] Yeah, and also looking forward to hearing perhaps some perspectives that I wasn't familiar about [with], in terms of your involvement with the RMA. The first thing I was going to ask you was, really, yeah, how you first got involved with the RMA, and what it's meant to you in the course of your career.

**Rachel** [00:00:34] Yeah, well I went to do a taught postgraduate [degree] at King's College, London, and was very much on the historical musicology side of the department, and we just went to RMA events, and it just was part of what we did: it was a way of airing new work and doing so in the context of [a] very friendly and supportive environment – and that was the RMA Research Students' Conference, of course. And then, when I stayed to do my PhD at King's, it continued to have that role for me, really. My first involvement with the, kind of, mechanics of the RMA, if you like, was hosting the RMA Research Students' conference at Huddersfield, in January 2000, and it was a great event. I was just about to move to the University of Leeds, and, at that point, there was a call for somebody to edit the newsletter for the RMA and then later the website, and I applied, and I got that. So that was my first real involvement in how the RMA runs.

**Laudan** [00:01:32] It's interesting, because I was reflecting as you were talking: I was an undergraduate student at Leeds, and then I moved to Goldsmiths for my Masters', and I eventually ended up doing my PhD [there] – so this is kind of mid '80s – but I don't actually recall as a graduate student learning about the RMA or knowing about the RMA. I had very much at that point, as a Masters' and then PhD student, got really involved with what was then the ICTM [International Council for Traditional Music] UK Chapter, which later changed its name to the British Forum for Ethnomusicology. So, I didn't really encounter the RMA until, I would say, the mid 1990s, because of the joint Musicological Societies' conferences. You know, by that time, I was teaching at what was the West London Institute of Higher Education, that then became part of Brunel [University], so I'd been teaching and working and studying in departments that included composers and musicologists and ethnomusicologists, and so on. But I think that was the first conference I'd been to, and I really, really enjoyed that mix of different approaches and subject areas.

I think I was also fortunate [in] that first teaching post, actually: I taught a module on music and gender in 1993, which I think was probably quite ahead of the curve in the UK at that time. And there was the sort of critical musicology crowd, with Dai Griffiths, and so on. So, I was more kind of aware of them in a way than I was of the RMA, which was probably more, kind of like, the traditional mainstream musicology, maybe. But [I was] also very excited by the critical musicology group, and the ideas that they were bringing in, because it felt to me this was very much a coming together of ideas from ethnomusicology, and kind of creating what I'd always desired, really, which was a sort of a more holistic music studies. So, it's interesting that the RMA was all sort of on the edge of my purview, as it were, and I think I didn't really get involved formally until the mid 2000s, when I was invited to join the Advisory Board for the *Journal*. And later on, then, I was invited to

stand for Council: I think it was 2015, so relatively late, I could say, in my academic career, and my decision to become more involved in the RMA was very much in line with this desire that I'd had really throughout my academic career, which was about, you know, breaking down those boundaries, I guess then, between these different areas of Music study. So, I sort of came into it in a quite a different way from you, I guess.

**Rachel** [00:40:00] Yeah. And having edited the newsletter and the website, I then, I think, was persuaded to stand for Council and then did my first stint on Council, and that was 2003–5. Then I chaired the Publication[s] Committee in 2006, and then I picked up the editorship of *JRMA* from 2007–13, and then I was a Vice President after that. So, yeah, I've been involved in the nuts and bolts of the RMA, I guess, since 2000, really, so that's probably about nearly 20 years.

**Laudan** [00:04:36] Quite a long time. What's it meant to you in the course of your career, then?

**Rachel** [00:04:41] Well, I developed a lot of skills through the different roles that I had with the RMA. And it sort of allowed me to build a network and to build my skills alongside my professional development as an academic and, obviously, as a researcher as well. I think opportunities to open up the discourse – and, I mean, I think that's something that's come through in what you've been saying, Laudan – that, you know, there was that really interesting moment where there was critical musicology and what we thought of as historical musicology. And I was trained very much as a historical musicologist, but a lot of the topics and subjects and standpoints that we associate with critical musicology and new musicology were really appealing to me. So I, you know, I was really keen to try and bring those together at exactly the time when they were kind of forcing each other apart. So, yeah, it was an interesting moment there, and I thought the RMA kind of allowed me to understand how those two aspects of Music Studies had developed and see ways in which they might be brought together, in my own work and through looking at what other people were doing in that space.

**Laudan** [00:05:49] Yeah, and I think there's a lot that resonates with me with what you're saying, particularly the opportunity for me to meet people outside my core – I hesitate to use the word discipline: I think of it more as a family, actually. Nowadays, methodologically and in so many other ways, it's very hard often to distinguish between some of these strands of Music Studies – which is a good thing – but, you know, ultimately, my training was as an ethnomusicologist, so I sort of feel a certain allegiance; I have certain friendships; there's the literature that you read as a student... so, it's more of a kind of an affinity group in a way. So, the RMA allowed me to forge new friendships that weren't people I was teaching with, necessarily in my department, so scholars who I might not have interacted with as much – and to go to the conferences.

When the Research Student conferences were happening, I wasn't really aware of them until, a few years ago, they started being held jointly. And I think that was a great initiative: the teaming up with BFE and having the joint Research Student conferences. So, I never had an opportunity to go to those as a student, but I have attended quite a few of them as Council member. What I really love about that conference is the fact that nobody's labelled as a musicologist or an ethnomusicologist or a popular-music person, and you wouldn't necessarily know from going to some of the papers – quite a lot of the papers, actually. And I think that's something that is really, I think, very promising for the future. When you look at younger scholars, you know, for many of them, I think these kinds of divisions don't really matter any more – because I think some older scholars can still be a bit territorial in my experience.

**Rachel** [00:07:35] I'd agree.

**Laudan** [00:07:36] And I think it's more about, 'What are the tools that I can draw on that are useful for the for the research questions that I want to find out about?' You know, I found myself recently doing more historical work than I've done previously, for example, so, there might be tools within historical musicology that are useful for me. And similarly, you know, ethnography has obviously become something that historical musicologists (in inverted commas) are using. And I think the RMA provides a really, a nice place where these interactions and these conversations can happen.

**Rachel** [00:08:08] [It's] certainly been that for me as well.

**Laudan** [00:08:10] So, one thing I was going to just mention was that one of my, as I say, my motivations was about widening out, or perhaps helping to widen out the work of the RMA. But there was a tension there because I remember having conversations – actually with people on the committee at the British Forum for Ethnomusicology – about, you know, more joint events or whether, in fact, maybe these two organisations should merge: you know, is there any value, in fact, of having two separate musicology bodies, if you like? And I think the feeling was very strongly that there are lots of people who still see themselves very much as ethnomusicologists and want to maintain that identity. And I understand that, although I don't feel that particularly, myself. And, for me, that position in some ways exacerbates my problem of not really knowing what to call myself. You know, I'm a music scholar: I study music. I don't really like the 'ology'; I don't really like the 'ethno' – and I've written about this in Henry Stobart's book. I feel personally, I have this torn identity in the sense that I feel ethnomusicology is still my family, but I don't like the word, and I don't like the division that it implies.

I think for the RMA, on the other hand, the challenge is an organisation that historically has been very much focused on historical musicology, and you can still see that on Council, you know – the balance of people on Council – although it's starting to change. And the RMA has, I think, over recent stewardships, really tried hard to broaden out its remit with the Practice prize and all kinds of, all kinds of other initiatives, not just that. But thinking about where the RMA goes from here, you know, what is its identity? Where does it go? What should it look like in 10, 20 years' time? I think it's quite an interesting one. And of course, we organised that event, last summer: it was an online event, which sort of came out of a survey we did of the membership a couple of years ago, particularly around the name, but also the kind of identity of the organisation. And I think there is still a sort of old guard that is not necessarily in favour of the broadening out. In fact, when we did the survey, there were comments like, 'Well, if the RMA is going to become somewhere for everyone working in Music Studies, perhaps we need a British Association of Historical Musicology'. And perhaps we do: but I think it's a fair question because, you know, they will say, 'Well, the popular-music people have got their organisation, the ethnomusicologists have got their organisation, so, is there to be one organisation that covers everyone or, if there are to be separate organisations, then, you know, where does the RMA fit into all of that?' And I still don't have a very clear answer for that, actually.

**Rachel** [00:11:05] I think it's really important for there to be free-flowing ideas between all subdisciplines under Music Studies. The idea of sort of hiving off each faction into its own little association would be really, really a backwards step, and something that would probably take a lot of the energy and excitement out of the organisation, certainly from my own perspective.

Most recently within the RMA I've chaired the LGBTQ Music Study Group, and, you know, that's actually been a really interesting role: some really, really excellent work going on in that group. And yet I came across quite a few attitudes that were along the lines of 'Oh, my goodness me', you know, 'What next?'. And that's a pity, because, within the context of the broader

organisation, there's a real role, when new ideas or new energies or new perspectives are sort of bubbling up. For the RMA to see that and to give that its own space to develop and see where it goes – and there are lots of success stories.

**Laudan** [00:12:07] What's really positive is that, you know, the student group is very active of course, and really the RMA, you know, it belongs to the youngsters coming up, really: you know, it's their organisation. In a way, I feel like I'm sort of coming to the end of my career now, and I just really hope...

**Rachel** [00:012:22] It's really exciting to go along to the RMA and BFE Research Students' conference, because you can just go along, observe and just be impressed, excited, stimulated. And, you know, under those circumstances, it just, it feels like the Association is in great hands and has got a great future, and it's really vibrant: lots of discourse, discussion going and, you know, all in a very positive and supportive way.

**Laudan** [00:12:49] I guess that's why I don't worry too much about some of the comments I read in the survey that we did, that, in some ways, I found quite shocking. I mean, I don't know for sure that those comments were not from a younger person or a student. But I have a feeling that there are fresh ideas coming in. And I think that's really, really positive.